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REPLY TO JACK CAPUTO

Merold Westphal

I first thank Jack Caputo for his superb summary of my position, then call attention to sin as an epistemological category in Aquinas, the (largely undeveloped) resource for a Pauline hermeneutics of suspicion. There follow clarifications of my understanding of Derrida's atheism and of my suggestion that he is a natural law theorist. Finally, I argue that my own position of a faith that cannot convert itself into sight a) places no a priori constraints on what we can say about God, however traditional or bizarre, but only on the meta-claims we make about our beliefs, and b) that we do not become more radical by diminishing the substantive content of our belief.

Jack begins his comments with an extended summary of what he takes to be the heart of my view, a methodological postmodernism that is a double hermeneutics: a hermeneutics of finitude whose theological correlate is the doctrine of creation and whose form is that of a post-Hegelian Kantianism, and a hermeneutics of suspicion whose theological correlate is the doctrine of the fall and which draws not only on the great modern "secular theologians of original sin," as I like to call Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Sartre, but also on the Pauline tradition about the noetic effects of sin as it reaches through Augustine, Luther, and Calvin to Kierkegaard. This account states what I am up to with great clarity and accuracy and I am most grateful for it. I wish I had written it myself.

My only quibble about these opening pages concerns not myself but Aquinas. In a recent colloquy with Richard Kearney, he expressed the suspicion that I, the Protestant, would be more sympathetic to Aquinas than he, the Catholic; and he was right. Now, as if replaying that scene, I want to put in a good word for the "angelic" doctor. He, too, and not just the Luther and Calvin, knows about the noetic effects of sin. He speaks of human reason, "wherein is mortal sin," as in need of restoration by justifying grace and continues that "since man's reason is not entirely subject to God, the consequence is that many disorders occur in the acts itself of reason" (ST I-II, Q. 109, A. 8). This is why natural law, which depends solely on human reason, is in need of divine law, given through revelation. Human reason participates in "the dictate of divine reason . . . imperfectly" (ST I-II, Q. 91, A. 3). Nor is this merely a matter of finitude. "But when man turned his back on God, he fell under the influence of his sensual impulses." This departure from the path and the law of reason leaves us



with "reason bereft of its vigor" (Q. 91, A. 6). This means that "reason is perverted by passion, or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature" so that "the natural law was so perverted in the hearts of some men . . . that they esteemed those things good which are naturally evil" (Q. 94, A 4-5). There is even a social dimension to all this. In a passage that is perhaps as close as Aquinas ever gets to Marx and Nietzsche, he writes that "the secondary precepts [of] the natural law can be blotted out from the human heart, either by evil persuasions, just as in speculative matters errors occur in respect of necessary conclusions; or by vicious customs and corrupt habits" (Q. 94, A. 6).

I don't deny that Aquinas does not give the emphasis to this Pauline/Augustinian theme that Luther, Calvin, and Kierkegaard will give to it, and no doubt this has made it possible for all too many Thomists to ignore it all but completely. But it is there, and I believe that a Thomism that is faithful to its biblical sources and to the phenomenological evidence will develop this theme more fully than the possibly too angelic doctor himself.

Over against my "quibble" about Aquinas, Jack has two "refinements" to offer about my treatment of Derrida.. What a gentleman! As to Derrida's atheism, I have read his account in recent interviews in which he explains why he says he "rightly passes for an atheist," and I would now speak in a more qualified way about his relation to atheism. I like the suggestion that what Johannes Climacus calls becoming a Christian could also be described as rightly passing for a Christian. Still, it seems to me that a familiar scene is being replayed here, the scene in which one who self-identifies as an agnostic seeks to distinguish that stance from atheism. The difference between the two reduces significantly when one notices that the agnostic acts like the atheist far more than like the believer: does not pray, does not read the Bible, does not participate with a worshiping community, etc. I know that Derrida tells us that he prays, and I am not simply identifying him with this agnostic. But it does seem to me that he talks far more like an unbeliever than like a believer and that while he isn't a dogmatic atheist he isn't exactly neutral either. His discussions of the *Chora* are a case in point, for they seem to suggest the primacy of unmeaning and the void. In addition, there is his insistence that messianism be without a Messiah and that justice will never be actual. If the God of theism is real there just might be a Messiah and a Kingdom of God in which justice is fully actual. Jack himself shortly describes Derrida's appeal to a justice that is not constructed and therefore not deconstructible as "without God or nature."

On Derrida as a natural law theorist, I confess to using this title ("Derrida as Natural Law Theorist," in *Overcoming Onto-Theology*) in a playful and provocative manner, but I am also serious about it. I think the difference between Jack and me, if any, on this point, is less than it at first seems. I do not intend to identify Derrida with any particular earlier version of natural law theory but merely note that he thinks we should make moral appeal to a justice that is superior to and never reducible to positive law (or the prevailing moral ethos). This does not require the simple identification of nature with essence and with universal rule. I am in fact sympathetic with the arguments from Aristotle ("the decision rests with percep-

tion") to Derrida and Carol Gilligan that singularity must not be obliterated in universality, and while I don't think a fully nominalist alternative to hard-core essentialism is the best one, I am content to leave that matter as a debate among those I would consider natural law theorists. Taking a cue from Jack's suggestion, we might take "nature" to signify the singular as much as the typical.

When I suggest that Derrida seeks to "articulate the idea of a higher law to which every human code is answerable in a conceptual framework not constituted (or constricted) by those ideals", namely those of *episteme*, *scientia*, and *Wissenschaft*, the emphasis falls on *the idea*. I know that Derrida does not think that we can articulate justice in full innocence of those ideals, which have shaped us in ways we do not suspect and cannot erase. But what I think he is trying to do in "Force of Law" is to articulate the idea of a higher law or norm to which all actual moral and legal codes are answerable without tying *the idea* of such a "natural law" to what he, and Jack, and I take to be illusory epistemic ideals.

Since Jack enjoys having fun while doing philosophy as at least as much as I do, I have suggested that he follow up *Radical Hermeneutics*, and *More Radical Hermeneutics*, following the cultural wisdom of Hollywood, with a prequel entitled *Not So Very Damn Radical Hermeneutics*. Now, since no good deed goes unpunished, he suggests that I have already written just that book. Several comments:

1) The upshot of my argument is that we are free "to believe in the God of metaphysical theology . . . an infinite eternal omnipotent omniscient creator of heaven and earth." Yes, but with two important qualifications. First, so far as I am concerned, the ongoing debate over whether and if so how to attribute these "perfections" to God is a legitimate and important debate and not one I take to be settled. Moreover, the goal is not to create an ideal metaphysical system but to be faithful to biblical revelation so far as is humanly possible. This means, second, that such abstract metaphysical categories as those just mentioned must be teleologically suspended in the personal, moral notions of a God who loves, who cares, who invites, who suffers, and who gets angry. I see no reason for smirking in the notion that the world is a system for God but cannot be for us, since the onto-theological aspiration was precisely to make it a system for us.

2) Second, I agree that Derrida cannot silence Shirley MacLaine, but being free to believe does not mean that one is necessarily entitled to believe. It only means that a certain theory or cluster of theories does not settle the question of belief negatively. To the best of my knowledge no one has suggested that Derrida could silence Shirley MacLaine, so an argument to the effect that he can't would be a bit quixotic. But it has been widely suggested by friend and foe alike, that various postmodern philosophical theories and biblical Christian faith are incompatible. My argument is that they are not, that when certain themes are separated from the secular context in which they appear *but to which they are not conceptually tied*, they can be appropriated by theistic faith in general and Christian faith in particular. Being "free" of this or that particular objection provides no guarantee or security for faith, and in this sense, while the argument, to the degree that it is successful, makes faith "safe" from a particular (set of)

objection(s), it does not make faith in general safe but leaves it as risky as it appears to Kierkegaard.

3) This risk means that there are no guarantees or final assurances that this understanding of Christianity is superior to that version, or that Christianity is a better take on the real than Judaism or Hinduism, or that religion generically is superior to secularism generically. Jack writes, "There is no way to settle the undecidable fluctuation among the several faiths, or between the several faiths and a non-religious view of things." I agree, and with Johannes Climacus recognize faith as inextricably linked with "objective uncertainty." But, as Jack himself is fond of insisting, undecidability calls for decision, and I see no reason for saying that the decision of a faith that finds religion more compelling than secularism, that finds this religion more compelling than those religions, and that finds this version of this religion more compelling than other versions should be discredited as insufficiently radical unless radicality is defined in terms of minimal commitment. But that, it seems to me, would beg the question.

4) As to the self being at odds with itself rather than a "dull monovocal settled self-identity," I am quite in agreement. "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). But is that a reason for me to believe less than I do, less than I am trying to believe, less than what I rightly pass for believing?

5) Finally, with respect to God, I do not deny "the possibility that the world is not known comprehensively by anyone and that no one knows [that] we are here." My faith in God is just that, faith and not knowledge. But I did not need postmodernism to teach me that. As far back as I can remember I have believed that "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). I have never found proofs for the existence of God or other apologetic arguments in support of faith to be knockdown arguments giving apodictic certainty rather than *prima facie* plausibility at best. It may well be that we should think about God more as Jack does than as I do. But I fail to see in the *Je ne sais pas. Il faut croire* of Jacques and Jack any reason to think so.

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